

## 2017 November Health Notes by Evelyn Ames

### Malnutrition and Hunger: Its Impact on Senior Health

#### What do you know about malnutrition?

Question 1: Malnourished older adults: a. Look thin and frail b. Can be overweight or obese c. Always experience hunger d. Both a and b Question 2. The following can be causes of malnutrition in older adults: a. Limited income b. Trouble swallowing, chewing, or poor dental health c. Poor appetite d. Living alone or feelings of loneliness e. Weight loss f. All of these Question 3. Signs of malnutrition can include: a. Muscle weakness b. Fatigue c. Increased illness or infection d. Feeling irritable or depressed e. All of these

**Extent of malnutrition among older adults in the United States:** Reports from the National Council on Aging show that senior hunger and nutrition to be significant issues in the United States. More than 10 million older Americans are at risk of hunger. About 10% of adults are experiencing malnutrition. People with malnutrition can be both underweight or overweight. Obese individuals can—and often do—miss important nutrients. What food one eats can give energy but may lack key nutrients. Hunger is defined as the feeling or sensation of discomfort or weakness caused by lack of food. As people get older, they may not feel hungry. They lose their appetites, leading to less intake of important nutrients such as protein. Additional causes include restricted diets, lack of mobility, dementia, depression, gastro-intestinal disorders, and expensive medications that make one choose between healthy foods or medications.

**How nutrition and malnutrition affect the body:** Mobility, posture, strength, falling, the immune system and healing, and organs (e.g., eyes, skin, kidneys, and brain) are all affected. Although loss of bone and muscle occur as we age, malnutrition accelerates such loss. **Mobility:** weak muscles and bones make it harder to do everyday tasks. Physical exercise and eating diets high in protein, calcium and vitamin D are suggested. **Posture:** strong muscles and bones are needed to help keep one upright. Loss of height often occurs in the thoracic area of the spine. Awareness of erect posture when standing, walking and sitting may help to prevent slouching. Check posture, especially when sitting at a computer or when reading. **Strength:** Poor muscle strength may make it more difficult to do favorite activities. Physical exercise (e.g., lifting weights and daily walking) is a good starting point. **Falls:** weak bone and joint problems are major factors for falling (the leading cause of death and injury among older adults). Bone density testing under a doctor's recommendation can show extent of bone health/bone loss. Diets rich in nutrients that promote bone health are easily found at online sites such as the Arthritis Foundation, Mayo Clinic, Cleveland Clinic, and registered dietitian and nutrition organizations sites. A lack of nutrition affects the **immune system** and white blood cell count, making it harder to fight illnesses. A poorly nourished immune system increases the risk of infections. Vitamin and mineral deficiencies can accelerate vision loss caused by glaucoma, cataracts, and/or macular degeneration. Nutrient deficiencies, particularly of protein, may speed up the rate at which the brain loses neurons. This can impair speech, coordination, and memory. As to the kidneys, a deficiency of fluids and electrolytes can cause the kidneys to overwork, resulting in dehydration, joint pain, and cardiovascular issues.

**Steps for preventing malnutrition and staying well-nourished include:** understanding the meaning of malnutrition, learning and practicing how to identify and select foods highest in key nutrients such as protein, vitamins, and minerals, and taking care of oral health (dental disease affects the ability to eat). If a person finds it difficult to prepare or purchase food, programs such as Meals on Wheels or SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) can help, especially to receive home-delivered meals. The Bellingham at Home organization is a contact in our community as well as the Senior Activity Center. Answers to questions: Answer to # 1 is D. Answer to #2 is F. Answer to # 3 is E.

Sources: <https://www.ncoa.org/healthy-aging/hunger-and-nutrition/>  
<https://www.ncoa.org/healthy-aging/chronic-disease/nutrition-chronic-conditions/why-malnutrition-matters/10-ways-malnutrition-impact-your-health-6-steps-prevention/>